

Flying with eagles

A determined Japanese journalist
joined an air raid on Darwin in
January 1943.

By Steven Bullard

Butterflies circle in a white cloud. The searing heat scorches the verdant leaves of this airfield in the South Seas. I silently stand in front of the bomber's steadily rotating propeller with a handful of young eagles. There is no need to say "Well done!" Our emotions are one, as if we share a blood bond.

Previous page: An ominous sight: a formation of Betty bombers in New Guinea. AWM OG0606C

Below: The cockpit area of a Mitsubishi Betty bomber. AWM P00001.370

Right: Images from *South Pacific air war*: “young eagles” being farewelled by ground crews and in action over the Pacific.

Far right: A rare picture of a Betty Bomber taken from an Australian Spitfire during a raid on Darwin on 6 June 1943. AWM P02822.001

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So begins the account of a Japanese air raid over Darwin in early 1943. It was written by Saito Shin’ya, a journalist working as a propaganda officer, who accompanied the mission. It is one of several dramatic accounts from the front lines contained in *South Pacific air war*, a book published and distributed by the Navy Propaganda Department of Imperial Headquarters in 1944 to boost morale during the Second World War.

The book came into my hands during a research trip to Japan. I had spent an unsuccessful afternoon scouring the more reputable second-hand shops in Tokyo, keen to find copies of memoirs or accounts of the Japanese military campaign in New Guinea. In desperation, I entered a small, cluttered and somewhat tatty bookshop in Kanda. The shop assistant, cigarette dangling from his lips, looked away from the television just long enough to reveal his lack of interest: another foreigner looking for porn? In many of these shops, the gems were often deeply buried. But I did unearth a rare first-hand account by a transport supply officer with the Japanese force along the Kokoda Trail in 1942 – and *South Pacific air war*.

In addition to the account of the Darwin raid, *South Pacific air war* also deals with the very public loss of Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku, whose plane was shot down over Bougainville in April 1943, after the Allies had broken the Japanese codes. Other accounts of the air war, from the skies over the Solomon Islands, New Guinea and the Netherlands East Indies (now Indonesia), are filled with tales of daring, courage and

sacrifice, not to mention the occasional exaggeration of enemy losses.

Like any wartime propaganda, the account of the Darwin air raid has time and place obscured and references to details veiled by the hand of censors. Saito wrote that his adventure had occurred “earlier that year” and “by the light of the full moon”. These and other clues pinpoint the raid to the night of 20 January 1943, carried out by the Japanese navy’s 753rd Air Corps, operating out of Koepang in Timor. This information was later confirmed by the pilot of the plane in which Saito flew, Tanimura Masao.

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Darwin had been raided more than 60 times between the first attack on 19 February 1942 and the mission Saito went on, though his was the first in over two months. By early 1943, the overall war situation had become more defensive for the Japanese, owing to the effects of their losses at Midway and Guadalcanal. Impatient under these conditions, Saito was keen to bring back good news from the front, or at least to present the true nature of the pilots’ and aircrews’ experiences. Though non-operational staff were not permitted to accompany bombing missions from Koepang, Saito’s persistence was rewarded, and he became the first propaganda officer to fly a live mission.

Saito described the intense cold inside the Mitsubishi “Betty” bomber as they approached the Australian mainland at high altitude during the night of 20 January. He gazed at a new Shinto talisman hung within the plane to keep them safe, savouring the taste of a Japanese sweet given him by one of the six crew members. When the crew had taken their stations and the aircraft had dropped in preparation for their bombing run, Saito was initially transfixed by the serenity, as the plane rolled through searchlight beams rising from the ground. However, sudden bursts of anti-aircraft fire surrounded them with



“flashes of red, purple and yellow”, as the plane banked in preparation for its final run. “The rear machine-gun gleamed an eerie black. This was it.”

As the plane released its payload of 60-kilogram bombs, Saito marvelled how “the



攻撃開始

高空の間に涼風が大きく浮んできた。さつと翼を傾けて正に攻撃の火蓋を切らんとするわが陸上爆撃機。(海軍省提供)



必殺の魚雷発射

海面高く、敵が奔命の弾幕を織うて必中の魚雷を放つわが爆撃機。(海軍省提供)



南海基地の熱砂を巻いて涙々と征く海軍爆撃機隊(海軍省提供)

arm of the pilot and eye of the spotter worked in perfect harmony”. Only he was unaware at the time that the plane’s mission had been successful, causing much damage to the airfield facilities far below. Soon after, Saito’s aircraft was targeted by several Allied P-40s defending the base. The Betty was hit, resulting in damage to the right engine, and complete failure of the left. At half speed, with time seeming to stand still, all non-essential items were ejected from the plane.

Suddenly, one of the crew removed the talisman and stuck it between the adjustment tiller and the sunshade. Before my very eyes, two of the crew put their hands together and prayed for the propeller. I could not help from respectfully bowing my head to the white talisman.

The experience of combat made a deep and lasting impression on Saito. He later told a colleague over a glass of whiskey how “the traditional naval fighting spirit of pilots like Tanimura is profoundly moving”. Tanimura later admitted that he had considered using the crippled plane to ram into an Australian target, but that the life of the civilian under his care was reason enough to summon all his skill, with a measure of luck or divine aid, to return to base.

Many years after the war, Tanimura recorded his great disappointment that Saito’s health had prevented a reunion to recount their common experiences. From his account of the raid over Darwin in January 1943, we can surmise that for Saito the silent bond with the “young eagles” that was forged in battle did not need such affirmation. It was shared by all who had “escaped the jaws of death”. 



SAITO SHIN'YA

Saito Shin'ya was born in Fukushima Prefecture in Japan in 1914. After graduating from the Literature Department of the Imperial University in Tokyo (now Tokyo University), where he studied German romantic poetry, he took a position as a journalist with a local newspaper. He moved to the *Asahi Shinbun*, a leading Japanese daily newspaper, in 1939, but was conscripted in 1941 by the navy's Propaganda Department and sent to Kiska in the Aleutian Islands, and from there on to the South Pacific. He travelled and wrote extensively for the *Asahi* after the war, covering the Tokyo war crimes trials and the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in London. His journalism career was marked by his outspoken style and sometimes vitriolic pen. He retired from the *Asahi* in 1977 to concentrate on writing, but his health began to fail and he lost the sight of both eyes in the 1980s. Saito was known to enjoy a drink throughout his life, and turned to it for solace during his final days. He died in Tokyo in 1987.